

Le Brenne Visit Report

Standing on the scorched ground of Étang Puraïs I had time to contemplate on the work that we had done in Le Brenne both intentionally over the last two weeks and just as importantly unintentionally (and I am not talking about the fire that spread causing the grass at Étang Puraïs to burn, which in a way is good conservation, allowing new habitats to form, good for the butterflies, but very unintentional). The impact of the intentional conservation work was easy to see, but there were by-products of us being there too, the publicity for the area and enhancing interest in conservation work, which is far less participated in by volunteers in France than in Britain, just to list a few. Also the publicity for us, The European Conservation Action Network. We were all very proud to find ourselves on page 5 of the local newspaper and with many attempts of translation, very proud to find that the local community were taking an interest in the work we were doing and more importantly appreciated it. But whilst standing there looking over the lake which was clearly visible now due to the fire, I realised how much work we had actually achieved over the last two weeks and how I would probably need another two weeks to recover.

There is a lot of history to the way Le Brenne's looks today, with its numerous man made lakes which dominate the landscape. However to find out how it all started we have to go back 65 million years, the time when Le Brenne was being formed. This was a very active time, the dinosaurs had just died out; continents were crashing into each other, Mountain ranges were being built and Le Brenne did not escape all this activity. The Le Brenne area, after all the movement was now a basin and this basin trapped all the muds, sands and clays running down from surrounding highlands producing a very clayey area, which it remains today. As clay is a perfect liner for lakes and Le Brenne is situated in the centre of the country, where until recently it was impossible to get fresh fish, fish farming became the major industry and lakes were built by the 1000's. Present day Le Brenne is a haven for wildlife, unfortunately many areas have been under grazed and left for the scrub to dominate. The national park is buying up land when it can, much of it neglected and this is where we come in.

Many sites acquired by the national park are naturally succeeding to woodland, but were once the rich environment of grasses and wetland. Even though this is a natural succession it is very unnatural for all grassland to become woodland and where in the past the succession was controlled by the grazing animal it has now got to be controlled by careful conservation work. Conservation work does not involve destroying an entire habitat for the benefit of another, but instead aims to create a diverse environment with many different habitats. Over the two weeks we were there we worked on many different sites all with varying degrees of impact. The success stories were at La Touche, Cherine and Etang Puraïs. At La Touche we spent an entire day clearing the blackthorn and by the end of all our work the site looked really good. The same can be said at Etang Puraïs and Cherine where we spent a few days clearing the scrub, blackthorn and tree heather and we made a quite

an impact. All these area will benefit from the careful conservation work we carried out in those few days and with the careful management will become a good environment for the creatures of Le Brenne. Our major accomplishment over the period we where in Le Brenne was the creation of a ride in the Cherine woodland. The ride aims to encourage woodland browns to take up residency in the wood. The ride took a few days of hard work to complete and the full success of the project can only be seen with time.

Present day Le Brenne is a quiet and sleepy area. The area wasn't always so sleepy, it was once a thriving farming community, however over time as the economics made it less and less viable to graze animals, residents started moving to the cities. The population of Le Brenne grew old and farming of the area reduced dramatically. However this makes for a very traditional and peaceful area of France. The peaceful serenity of the national park was only disrupted by the English coming over with their chainsaws and brush cutters. But when the machines were turned off for those few minutes a day the full beauty of the place could be appreciated. The orchestral calls of the birds, the rustling of the leaves and the subtle sound of moving water all accompanied the magnificent views over the lakes. As Le Brenne is a very traditional area the cultural difference between us, the English, and the local French were easily noticeable. Food and work ethics where the major differences. I considered myself as a cheese lover before I went to France, but I could not compete with the French. I tried to keep up, but to tell you the truth I think I have had my fill of cheese for a lifetime and by the end of the trip I didn't want to see anymore cheese. But when one of the courses in a meal is just cheese its hard to avoid. It may have just been Nigel pushing us hard, but I am sure our breaks during work were not as long as the French standard breaks, this was demonstrated during a lunch break with the French wardens, which in total took around two hours, after starters, mains and dessert, coffee was only avoided by the fire at Étang Purais. Conservation is also looked upon differently in France. Where as England is over populated and every bit of undeveloped land has to be looked after to keep our diverse species of butterflies, birds, reptiles and insect, France has acres of natural environments. This spawns the feeling amongst the French that it is not necessary to conserve one bit of habitat because there is already plenty of diversity in the country. Shooting and hunting come higher up in the French priorities. I hope we encouraged a few locals to consider looking after the habitats in Le Brenne, but considering the tern out of French volunteer help (the only French volunteers we got were from Paris), I feel it will be along time before this will happen.

The two weeks we were there were really enjoyable and in our free time we had the opportunity to participate in many activities. I feel I have met a lot of very nice people and hope to keep in contact. It was a great opportunity and it has given me experience in the pros and cons of conservation work and it has also allowed me to see how other countries consider its importance. All in all I feel the trip was a great success and would recommend it to anyone who enjoys the outdoors.

James Maher

